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# THE JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLK-LORE.

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## THE INTERPRETATION OF FOLK-LORE.<sup>1</sup>

MR. PRESIDENT: In the late decades there has been much activity in the scientific study of mankind. The endeavor is to discover the course of the progress of mankind in culture—the evolution, the development, the becoming of the activities of mankind. At one moment we see man laboring in the arts of industry, at another moment in striving for pleasure, at another in expression by speech, and again in the development of institutions for the control of conduct, and finally in learning, the acquisition of knowledge. Men pass from one of these highways to another in the journey of life, engage in the five great human activities, the five great arts, the five Humanities. In the arts of industry the purpose is welfare, in the arts of pleasure the purpose is happiness, in the arts of speech the purpose is expression, in the arts of government the purpose is justice, in the arts of learning the purpose is knowledge. In passing along the great highway of learning in the pursuit of knowledge, man has held many opinions, some true, some erroneous. The origin and development of these opinions now presents a vast field of research, in which many scientific men are engaged. The subject is often called "Folk-lore." And this is a folk-lore society. The term folk-lore is often restricted to a narrower part of the great field. Permit me to further describe this more limited field, which is yet a vast region.

This Society is devoting itself to the study of the origin and the development of human opinions. All of the five great classes of arts are studied from a variety of sources, which may be classified in the same manner. I will speak of these sources as the five great Books of Humanity. We study the history of man as it is found in these books. We may study the rock-leaved book of geology. In the development of the world, Nature seemed to pause at the very

<sup>1</sup> Address delivered at the Sixth Annual Meeting of the American Folk-Lore Society, Washington, December 28, 1894.

last of her works, to write a postscript devoted to man. And so we find evidences of man in the records of very late geologic time. Then we may study mankind in the Tomb-book. Men have buried their dead everywhere ; the burial-mounds of America are scattered over all its surface ; so the tombs and mounds and sepulchres of men are discovered all over the habitable earth. The earth is really one great burial-place of antiquity. In these tombs have been placed the ornaments and the possessions of the dead, for reasons which I must not stop to explain ; so that in examining the tombs of antiquity we discover evidence of the culture of the days when the tombs were made. So we have the Tomb-book. Then, scattered all over the earth, on every plain, every plateau, every mountain-side, and in every valley, we find ruins of huts and houses and palaces, of villages and towns and cities ; and so we have the Ruin-book. Then along with this Stone-book and this Tomb-book and this Ruin-book, we have a fourth book of very great interest, the Folk-book. All savage peoples, all barbaric peoples, all the lower classes of mediæval civilization, and all mankind in the higher stages of civilization, have ideas and opinions which they have inherited from the past, — something more than that which has been delivered to them by Science, — and these ideas and opinions we study in the folk-lore or mythology of the past ; and this gives us a Folk-book, which is read by studying the peoples themselves and observing their activities as they are organized in tribes and nations.

Ever since the dawn of civilization, man has recorded his opinions on rocks, on the skins of animals, on the bark of trees, and on parchments made of many different fibres. All of these tomes may be considered as the great Scripture-book of the world. Thus we have the Stone-book, the Tomb-book, the Ruin-book, the Folk-book, and the Scripture-book, to study in our researches into the origin and growth of the Humanities.

But let us pause a moment to speak of the Folk-book, for this Society is engaged in deciphering the meaning of the tales of the Folk-book for the purpose of discovering the development of human opinions. How shall we gather these tales and interpret the opinions therein expressed ? In gathering the tales, a multitude of languages must be learned, for the tales as they are told can only be obtained from the languages in which they are told. Having collected the lore, how shall we interpret it ? How shall we discover the lessons which it teaches ? How shall we have a scientific knowledge of the opinions embodied in the tales ? It is to this problem of interpretation that I address myself in the remarks which I offer you. In the study of all of the books, for all purposes in the widely diversified activities of mankind, especially during the latter half of

the century, some most wonderful facts have been discovered and some most wonderful generalizations have been made, and it is to these that I first propose to call your attention. The grandest fact of all is that the human race is one. We have discovered the intellectual unity of the human race. That which distinguishes man from the lower animals is superior intellect, resulting in superior activities of all the five classes. That superior intellect is everywhere constructed upon the same plan. In every land and among every people, two and two make four. In every land and among every people, wherever there are human eyes to see it, the moon is round, and then gibbous, and then crescent. Wherever we go among all mankind, we find the same force in gravity, the same force of heat, the same force of light. Everywhere throughout the world these forces are the same. Again, in every forest plants grow from seed, trees grow from scions, and branches from twigs. The four great elements of the subject-matter of thought, number, form, cause, and evolution are the same everywhere. All minds are engaged on the same great problems of number, form, force, and genesis, and the truth which all minds seek is the same everywhere. So all minds must grow in the same direction toward the truth, and as mentality is the highest attribute of man, as his soul is the highest characteristic—in this highest attribute, in this chief characteristic, men are necessarily of one race. There can never be but one class of men, but one race, when we logically consider the fundamental attributes of men. Because of the preponderance of the psychic factor in mankind, they have not differentiated into species. Among the lower animals we find a wonderful evolution, a marvellous development of different forms and structures; among mankind we find, from the highest to the lowest, a tendency to involution or unification or integration. And while among the earlier peoples there was a tendency toward differentiation into species, they never fell into species but remained interfertile with one another.

The second conclusion that has been reached is that mankind was distributed throughout the habitable world at an early stage of culture, and his development everywhere can be traced back to the very beginning of the five great activities. All the progress made by men from the commencement of these five great activities up to the present time has been accomplished since they have been dispersed over the whole habitable globe. We must not forget that man with his rude arts was scattered everywhere between the walls of ice. He may have been excluded from the ice-zone of the north and from the ice-zone of the south, but between these barriers human beings were scattered over all the earth. The Garden of Eden was walled by ice. Let us look a little into the meaning of

this fact. In no valley, on no plain, on no mountain-side, throughout the habitable globe, can we travel without finding rude evidences of the earliest arts ; everywhere we find them. Scattered throughout the world were small tribes, each speaking its own language. There was a time — in the beginning of the science of philology — when it was hoped that all languages might be traced to one. The progress of research has destroyed that hope. As we go back in the study of languages, they are multiplied, they are multiplied everywhere. Mr. Cushing, who has just been speaking to you, comes from the study of one little tribe, the Zufi, and finds its speech made up from two or more tongues which have coalesced. And so I might illustrate from the many languages in North America, and show that no speech has been found that is not made up of other tongues ; all are compound. So we must think of mankind as scattered everywhere throughout the world in little tribes, at the beginning of culture, — a tribe on this plain, a tribe by that bay, a tribe on that shore of the ocean ; little tribes scattered over the whole of the habitable earth, all beginning their industries, mainly in stone art ; beginning their speech, mainly in mimic words ; beginning their pleasures in the same childish sports, in the same athletic exercises, in the same games of divination and chance. So place this picture clearly before your mind : the whole habitable earth covered with tribes, not closely crowding one another, perchance, but covered with little tribes, each speaking its own language and engaging in its own activities of all classes. Now, then, consider that their civil organization, that their institutions, grew out of the family relation. These things are deeply imbedded in the biotic constitution of mankind. There must be husbands and wives, parents and children. Then we get kinships, and then speech develops names for the relationships of consanguinity and affinity ; and institutions are formed upon the plan that age gives authority, and so their words are framed in such a manner that it is impossible to address a man except by expressing his relative age, and either claiming or yielding authority. We have these languages, then, spread all over the country ; but tribes unite with tribes, and it is found that the union is accompanied by a compact that one little tribe shall intermarry with another, that the maidens of one shall be given to the other, and vice versa. Then we have tribal divisions recognized as clans and as kinship clans ; then these unite. So this coalescence goes on and on, and little tribes speaking different languages unite their streams of blood, their languages and institutions, and still the coalescence goes on, the compounding continues and continues, until what ? Until genealogies are lost. Remember that a time comes when by the admixture and coalescence, by the com-

pounding and the dividing, the streams of blood are lost ; and then men learn to organize upon a territorial basis instead of on a family basis ; and so we have nations instead of tribes. And why is this organization made ? Because genealogies are lost — all gone. It is no longer possible to trace the genealogy of tribes. After nations are recognized, we cannot trace them back to an original tribe, but only to a confusion of many tribes swallowed up in nations. Tribal genealogies are lost.

When we come to consider activities, we must remember that no man ever completely invents anything himself ; he may add some little to the invention of others, but all inventions of industries, pleasures, institutions, speech, and opinions — and these are all inventions — primarily all of these inventions are inherited. The child as he enters on the stage of life inherits all that comes from his ancestors. Now all activities are accultural with the individual ; what he does is very little. Arts, of whichever of the five classes they may be, are at first autogenous, not by individual, but by tribe, and as the tribe enlarges, they inherit more and more by the union of tribes, until at last a peculiar thing happens to man, by which arts can be borrowed ; and arts are rarely borrowed until man has reached this particular stage. The arts of speech, the arts of government, the arts of opinion, are never borrowed until man reaches a peculiar condition, until he attains written speech, which may travel beyond the tribe and the nation. Then these arts are borrowed, but all such arts prior to that period must be held as autogenous by tribes and accultural to individuals by heredity. The arts of these classes can be borrowed from one people by another only when they have acquired written language.

Arts of industry and arts of pleasure seem to have traveled to a very limited extent anterior to the development of written language. They are expressed to some extent in material objects whose use can be easily learned ; they are themselves object-lessons ; yet it is ever a matter of surprise to the scientific man engaged in these branches of research to discover how little has been borrowed and passed from people to people beyond the boundaries of intelligible speech. Ever it appears that the same materials under like conditions are used in like manner, because of the unity of the human mind. Wherever stones were naturally quarried and easily accessible, men learned to build their houses of stone ; where the forest presented wind-riven trees, there men learned to build houses of wood ; where reeds and tules were abundant and more easily fashioned, they made their houses by weaving wattles and mats ; where other material failed, they covered their houses with earth ; and such arts were developed by the tribes severally. Scattered far and wide,

the same thoughts came to all under the same conditions. Let us understand this by an example which has been brought before you at this session of the Society. Everywhere tribal man supposed the earth to be flat; nearly everywhere nature clearly marked out the east and the west, the north and the south, by the rising of the sun and moon and the motions of the orbs of heaven. So man early learned to speak of the four quarters of the earth, and symbolized these four quarters by two lines crossing each other. Thus every tribe developed the symbol of the cross as a world symbol of the four quarters. Sometimes they added to this a symbol for the zenith and another for the nadir, and rarely they added a seventh symbol for the here as the centre of the world. Now having a world symbol, as a cross, whenever it was desirable to express world-wide facts, this cross was used as a basis, and to the arms of the cross were added variations to express the winds of the world, to express the gods of the world, and to express many other world-wide concepts. So the diversified cross everywhere grew into a Swastika, and the cross and its variations were thus autogenous with many tribes. Again, when man developed picture-writing to some extent, so that he could express forms with a little skill, he learned to engrave and to paint the outlines of the human form, sometimes in action, sometimes standing still, and sometimes sitting upon the ground. In that early time men sat squat on the earth, for stools and chairs were not used, or rarely used, and the attitude of rest, attention, and contemplation was that in which the form was seated on the ground. Buddha is thus represented, but everywhere among the North and South American Indians seated figures are found in this manner, and it is not necessary that occidental tribes should be taught this method of representation by oriental peoples; they learned it for themselves, and it came along as an autogenous growth with all our tribes. The symbols of speech were examined, and it was said that the tongues of mankind were borrowed; they have tried to make this tribe or that come from the Norsemen, because of similarity of speech, or to represent the lost tribes of Israel; they have tried to bring them from all over the world, by inference from these similarities. But now this is all wiped out; philologists never dream of these things any more in this country. The same is true of institutions. When we found among the North American Indians such customs and traits as are described in Scripture and in Hebrew literature, when the patriarchal institutions were seen among the North American Indians, there arose a large school of anthropologists which thought that the Indians were the lost tribes of Israel. So as to their ideas of decoration, they have been derived from Egypt, and from this land and from that land.

Now the point I wish to make is this: Do not fall into the same class of errors in interpreting the folk-lore of the world; keep out of this mire. Remember that when we find abundant similarity, it is because of the unity of the human soul, the unity of the human mind. You will always find abundant similarity; you will find the same inventions here and everywhere. Then do not conclude that you have found some far, far away people from whom they have come, that they come from the Ind, or from Greece or from China or from Japan; and more than that, do not believe without evidence that the thing is borrowed. The presumption is that, when we cannot understand the concept behind a thing, it is some world-wide concept that we have found; and whenever a thing is asserted to be borrowed, it must be proved to be such, before we have a right to believe it such. Some things have been borrowed. In later civilization, when arts go through the world in printed speech, the probability of borrowing increases. But ever bear in mind that nothing should be supposed to be borrowed until it is proved to be borrowed.

And now I want to speak of two other things, one of which relates to the interpretation especially of folk-lore itself. There are four stages of thought, four methods of explaining things, which accompany language from savage society to scientific society. Let us understand these four methods. Among the lowest peoples of mankind everything is explained by *imputation*. Let us see what that signifies. The savage hears a sound, and it becomes to him a symbol of a body or a bird; or it may be the creaking of a tree, and then he will impute animal life to the tree; he hears the thunder, and imputes that to some person, to some individual, animal or human like himself. Wherever you take up North American mythology, among all of our tribes, you find that the chief method of interpreting the unknown is to impute it to something like man himself—the method of interpreting by imputation. He does not invent new beings, but he gives new attributes, new characteristics, to the beings that he does know. He gives animal life to trees, and in various ways imputes to things attributes which do not belong to them. The sky above us is blue, and I think you will recognize that we sometimes call it the cerulean firmament, the cerulean solid. We inherit that expression; we know it is not a solid or a firmament, but our forefathers entertained the idea that the sky was a solid; and you may go everywhere among the North American Indians and find that it is a solid of various substances, generally of ice. They impute solidity to the sky, and when they find crystals scattered over the earth they say that pieces of the sky have fallen. When it rains or snows, they will tell you that the rain god or some

other god is scattering it from the sky. We find these ideas everywhere—in Australia and in India; but do not consider that the idea is borrowed. The idea is universal in one stage of culture that the sky is a solid, a blue solid of some kind, a firmament. The air is unseen and practically unknown to the savage mind as an ambient transparent fluid; but he knows of the winds and he knows of the human breath; so he interprets the wind as the breath of beasts, especially of great beasts who live in the four quarters of the earth. Then he discovers fannings that are much like breathings, and he may interpret the winds as the fannings of great birds. Then he discovers that the air may be pressed out of skin sacks, and that they also breathe, and so he concludes that winds may be carried in sacks. All of these are methods of imputation by which attributes are assigned to various things, which properly do not belong to them.

At last a second method of interpretation arises. By and by it comes to be discovered that there is an error in the first interpretation, and then mankind begins to personify attributes. So the lightning becomes a person or, as we say, a god. So there is a rain god and a lightning god, and a morning god and an evening god, and a god of light and a god of darkness, and many other personified attributes. So there arises a vast system of personified properties, which is usually called mythology. The second method, then, is by personification, the first is by imputation.

The third, to which I must come at once without explaining further, is by *reification*, making a thing out of an attribute, making an abstract thing into a subtle material thing; and this follows all the way down to the present time. All of these methods are found more or less in savagery, but imputation prevails; in barbarism personification prevails; in early civilization reification is the more common error of interpretation. So we have essences and principles and all sorts of abstractions reified, made into real, material things, or interpreted as some strange metaphysical being which is supposed to be not yet fully understood. What is two? Who shall explain the number two? Ah, we have it! It is the principle of duality. Triplicity is the principle by which the number three is explained, multiplicity is the principle by which the many are explained. Then plants have mysterious virtues, and various mysterious principles are discovered in all the world—mere names for phenomena not understood. This is the method of interpretation by reification.

There is a fourth. All the way down the history of mankind, from the earliest savagery to the present time, some knowledge has been current; but the unknown has been more and more revealed and knowledge has increased. In this increase four great class of properties or attributes are discovered: the properties of number, the prop-

erties of form, the properties of force, and the properties of genesis. When we understand any body in the world numerically or classifically, formally or morphologically, causally or dynamically, and genetically, we are supposed to fully understand it, and the mind rests satisfied with the knowledge ; but as long as any attribute of number, form, force, or genesis remains unexplained, the human mind is unsatisfied and refuses to rest in peace. This is the scientific interpretation of the facts, and depends upon the true facts. In the study of folk-lore, then, we should endeavor to discover by which of the methods of interpretation the opinions have been developed. Considered from this point of view, it will be understood that the Folk-lore Society has an important function to perform — no less than the investigation of the history of human philosophy.

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